

THE LAND FROM UNDER THEIR FEET

Caravans
at Woodside
Travellers' Site
photo: David Sillitoe/The Guardian

Travelling communities encouraged to buy sites to live on are being **evicted by local councils.**

Emma Rubach discovers that with nowhere left to turn, they are now fighting back



It's a cold November morning and a battle is taking place. At Woodside Travellers' Site in Bedfordshire the bailiffs are driving a JCB through a wall of old trailers and tyres. Barricaded inside are Cliff Codona, the head of the National Travellers Action Group, his wife Jane, their children and a crowd of traveller and non-traveller supporters. The council wants to evict the Codonas and put them back on the road, but the Codonas won't budge. They paid £230,000 for the land and have lived on it for five years. Their children go to school here. They don't want to leave their home.

Woodside has become a cause célèbre, but Codona and his family are not the only ones being forced out of their homes. All over the country, as winter approaches, traveller families are bracing themselves to spend Christmas in lay-bys because they have been evicted from land they own.

Thomas Delainey is from a community in Epping Forest who, for 12 years, have bought and settled land previously used by travellers. Now the High Court has decreed that it can't be used for caravans. "We thought we'd be OK. But they've given us no fair play," he says. After spending around £7,000 on improvements to their land, the community has been told to leave within 14 days. They must use their own money to turn their site back into a field.

It's the same all over the UK: sites in Chelmsford, Brent, Basildon and Nuneaton are currently under threat. Emma Nuttall of support and legal advice group Friends, Family and Travellers says: "If people knew what was happening, they would be shocked. Travellers are coming to us desperate for help but we have to say there is nothing we can do."

Now a coalition of traveller groups is fighting to get the Traveller Law Reform Bill back on its road to parliament. Created four years ago by the Traveller Law Research Unit at Cardiff University in response to appalling living conditions, the TLRB seeks to force local authorities to provide appropriate accommodation, using money from the Housing Corporation. It is the only piece of legislation seeking to address the severe accommodation crisis currently affecting the UK's 300,000-strong traveller community.

Launched in January, the bill was interrupted during its first reading in July. Now it's gathering momentum again with the support of Conservative MP Kevin McNamara, who has tabled an early day motion urging MPs to support the bill. Meanwhile, a report to the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister recommends investing in group housing for travellers. Already used to good effect in Ireland, group housing allows extended families to settle without being broken up.

The problem – which, according to 31-year-old Delainey is "twice as bad" as when he was a child – stems from a catch-22 that has left the UK's travelling community of Gypsies and Irish Travellers without a place to settle, yet banned from taking to the road. Since the 1994 Criminal Justice Act removed the obligation for local councils to provide sites, the government has advised travellers to buy their own land. But often, this is just the beginning of their troubles. Only 10 per cent of travellers, compared to 80 per cent of settled people, ever obtain planning permission. Land with the right credentials is usually unaffordable.

Travellers admit to taking chances on land, hoping they will later gain planning permission.



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But it rarely succeeds. Basildon District Council says it is pursuing several injunctions on individual families and groups of families across the district who have violated planning permission. There is no council site in the district so if the families are evicted they will have to go to Essex council for alternative accommodation. With only 25 pitches in Essex they are likely to be stranded. The Traveller Law Research Unit says 5,000 families in the UK have nowhere legally to live, meaning they must survive without proper sanitation, under constant threat of being moved on by the authorities.

"People who object to travellers tend to do so because they have experienced unauthorised sites," says Lord Avebury, who has dedicated much of his working life in parliament to campaigning on behalf of Gypsies. As Eric Lubbock MP, Lord Avebury introduced the Caravan Sites Act on 1968 (it was repealed in 1994) and currently chairs the TLRU advisory committee. "If people could see Gypsies on decent sites we wouldn't have this racism," she says. By driving people back on to the road, he argues, more sites with problems like inadequate sanitation will be created and the vicious circle continues.

Those without a site are condemned to be constantly moved on. Delainey says: "The police are ripping us apart. We tried to park up on the services of the M25 and got thrown off." Confused and angered by government policy, Delainey has pledged to make a stand. "It will be worse for the council," he says. "If they throw us off, we'll go to their beauty spots and put our car-

avans right in the middle of them. Do they think we are just going to vanish? Where are we supposed to go? The moon?"

The issue of appropriate accommodation is perhaps the strongest card the travelling community can play. In order to protect their way of life they need to be able to follow the old migratory routes when they choose, heading to the fairs and gatherings that bolster their culture. But to access education for their children they either need housing that suits their needs, or permanent sites. "I would dearly love to see pilot sites for group housing," says Avebury. "It wouldn't cost a fortune: we need between 1,000 and 2,000 dwellings over the next five years." Transit sites, also, are important in allowing travellers to move on.

To the average, settled person, who perhaps has a romantic image of Romanies in pretty painted caravans, the grim – often urban – reality of travellers' lives leads people to ask why they don't just allow themselves to be housed. Travellers are relegated to waste grounds and industrial sites, so why not just turn to the state and admit defeat?

John Lee is spokesman for the 21 families who live on the Bulkington Fields site in Nuneaton. The council is throwing his community off their land because, it says, it is illegally situated on a greenbelt area. Lee explains why he doesn't want to turn to the council: "We are not asking for handouts," he says. "We will never live in houses. This is our way of life." Nor, he says, will he move away from Nuneaton in search of better site provision. "We are born and bred here," he says. "Our grandfathers are buried here. Why should we move away?"

Avebury suggests that the Human Rights Act and the new Homelessness Act could also be used to set precedents giving travellers a better chance of winning their battles for land. But this will take a long time. Meanwhile, more travellers face eviction every day, creating an atmosphere of anger and distrust. Like the Codona family, Delainey, Lee and their communities plan to defend what is theirs until the bitter end. They have no choice. There is nowhere else for them to go.